

THE MAGIC BEHIND THE PROJECTIONIST BOOTH

Andrew Bracey on stillness and flicker,
light and shadow.

Cinema is often talked about as a place that suspends your disbelief; somewhere to suck us away from everyday life and for a few hours believe in something else. Maybe, though, cinema is most magical when it jolts us out from this suspension. As a child I can clearly remember a disrupted screening where the film became trapped, a single frame out of 25 momentarily appeared on the screen and quickly caught fire; the illusion of the movie was burst and a new wonder was created. I believe my love of cinema started then. Perhaps this is also why I am drawn to filmmakers and artists who reveal the normally hidden or suppressed within their work; when the cinematic machine is paused or breaks and new potentials can be glimpsed.

Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia* begins with an image that a voice-over reveals is the first photograph Frampton made 'with the direct intention of making art'. About 30 seconds into the footage we become aware that the camera has not been recording just an image, but also an event. Smoke starts to appear around the edges of the photograph before catching alight on the hot plate it has been placed on. As we watch other photographs burn, we realise we are hearing Frampton's thoughts regarding the following photograph. We thus hear and anticipate the future, whilst also reminiscing (as Bill Simon wrote) 'about the past, about the time and conditions under which the photographs were made. The double time sense results in a complex, rich experience.'

Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) also deals with complexity of memory and time. The film is (almost) completely made of still photographs that appear on screen from between a fraction of a second to over a minute in one instance. When *La Jetée* is seen on a reel of

celluloid there are vast repetitions of each single image that creates the appearance of stillness on screen. As a former projectionist this repetition was strangely captivating as one is usually used to seeing slight changes from one frame to the next that creates, on screen, the illusion of movement. Halfway through the film there are a few frames that run at 25 frames a second. The footage of a woman's sleepy blink jolts the viewer and the magic of cinema is both stripped apart and wonderfully articulated. Marker and Frampton encapsulate how film is created from still images not moving ones, one of the great wonders of cinema.

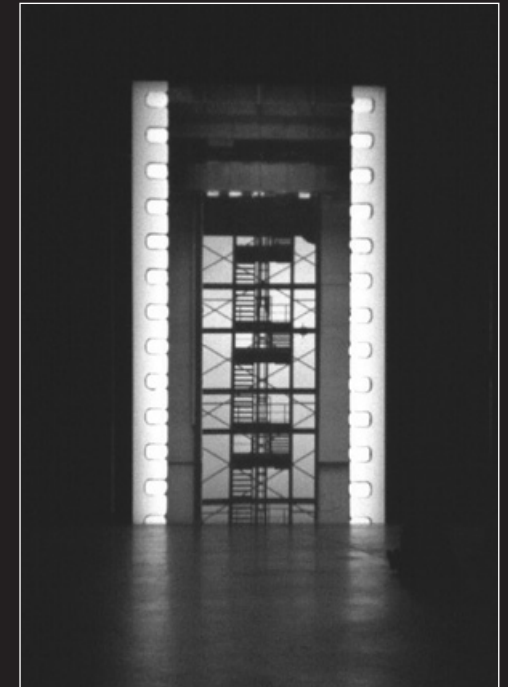
Gebhard Sengmüller's *Slide Movie* reveals and breaks this illusion in an equally effective manner. A scene from a celluloid print of *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974) is cut frame-by-frame and placed in slide mounts. In the gallery, 24 slide projectors each show one frame every second to create a flickering recreation of the cinema projector, whilst also shifting attention towards the apparatus. Felix Stalder has said that this is articulated in the piece 'so vehemently that's its message becomes a massage that is not only intellectually comprehensible, but can actually be physically experienced.' The relationship of theory becoming practice and vice versa is perfectly articulated within the work, one that creates and explains magical facets of cinema.

Dave Griffiths' work foregrounds the projectionist's cue dot. If the keen eye of the projectionist misses these vital four frames when the near invisible circle appears in the top right hand corner, then the audience is made aware of the film-strip and projectionist as the film reel finishes and the countdown numbers appear. Griffiths isolates these cue dots to create wonderful collages manifested in diverse media including short films, microscope slides and another 'lost' medium, microfiche. Fragments of the films the cue dots come from are visible and the frame is manifested. The easily missed cue dots are here isolated and magnified by

repetition and amplification by Griffiths.

Tacita Dean is increasingly using the potential inherent in early cinematic special effects such as glass matte painting, multiple exposures produced in-camera and masking to create richly layered film-collages in works such as *Film* and *JG*. All of these effects take place in the camera or painstakingly by hand back in the studio. Something wonderful and striking happens here, we sense the hand, but the magician's hand of the artist, as opposed to the silicon chip. Nicholas Cullinan has written (in relation to Dean's work) that, 'film has its own distinctive texture and qualities, capturing light, colour, movement and depth in ways that digital cannot. Moreover, it is not only the future of the medium that is under threat, but also its past: when the flickering projected image is transferred to a pixelated screen something unique is lost.'

This flickering has been described as the 'fire effect', where there is a stimulation of the viewer's retina by the light refracted through each frame into the eye creating an after image that the brain rationalises as being movement, as one frame moves into another. Digital has no need for the fire effect and thus suppresses the optical stimulation in the eye. It is one of the main reasons I believe that old films just don't look the same anymore. The flicker of the projector, the dust and scratches of the filmstrip all have an authenticity and sense of history that digital can only fake. The work of artists such as Dean, Sengmüller and others like Rosa Barba and Emily Wardill reveal the world behind the roar(ing) power of the projector and the magic potential of filmstrip in the hands of the projectionist. It would appear that it is in the hands of artists that the continued magic of celluloid and the projectionist's machine rests.



TACITA DEAN, *Film*, 2011
plinth and projection